

Md. senator and activist, Verda Welcome, is dead

By Phillip Davis

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Verda Freeman Welcome, the civil rights activist who assembled an organization to beat the 4th District Democratic machine and then went on to win election as the United States' first black female state senator in 1962, died Sunday at her home in Northwest Baltimore.

She had recently celebrated her 83rd birthday and had been ill since October, according to her daughter, Mary Sue Welcome. She was pronounced dead early Sunday at Liberty Medical Center.

Verda Freeman Welcome served in the state House of Delegates from 1959 to 1963, and in the state Senate from 1963 to 1982. Until 1988, she maintained an office in the 3400

block of Holmes Avenue, continuing to work with community members for whom she had devoted a life of service.

Yesterday, friends, family and colleagues remembered a woman who got into politics because she had an urge to help others.

"She was a civic activist," said her daughter. "But she became frustrated because as she tried to help people, she always had to go to someone else. That's when she decided it would be better to be able to have your own program put in place."

So, meeting with other activists in the top floor of the old Met Theater at the corner of Pennsylvania and North avenues, she decided to run for the House of Delegates.

At the core of her campaign was a group of black Baltimore women known as the Valiant Women, who spent long hours on Pennsylvania Avenue handing out literature and going from door to door in the neighborhoods on her behalf. They and other activists managed to beat the Jack Pollock Democratic machine in 1958 and to send Mrs. Welcome to the House of Delegates.

"We were behind her, not the 4th District," said Ann Green, one of the Valiant Women. "She was an inspiration for all of us who knew her. We were just elated when she won the Senate."

"She broke the barrier," said state Sen. Troy Brailey, who has represented the district since 1982. "When she ran the first time, it was almost impossible for anyone black to run for public office."

Jim Williams was city editor of the *Baltimore Afro-American* in 1962 when Mrs. Welcome won election to become the first black woman in the United States to sit in a state senate. "It had impact," he said.

"Because she was a black woman winning a seat in the state senate, it became a national story," said Mr. Williams, now communications director for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. "From that point on, she was very popular and a much-demanded speaker."



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VERDA FREEMAN WELCOME

Mrs. Welcome was the third of 16 children born on a small truck farm in Lake Lure, N.C. When her mother died, she stayed in school by taking night classes so she could help take care of her brothers and sisters during the day.

She came to Baltimore in 1929 and graduated three years later from Coppin Normal School with a teaching certificate.

She earned a bachelor's degree in history from Morgan State College in 1939 and in 1943 completed a master's degree in history from New York University.

She married the late Dr. Henry C. Welcome in 1935 and taught for 11 years in the Baltimore schools.

Before Mrs. Welcome began her legislative career, she was active in neighborhood groups. She was president of the Northwest Improvement Association, and in the 1950s, she was a pioneer in the fight to lower racial barriers at the White Coffee Pot, a Baltimore eatery.

Once she was elected to the General Assembly, she continued chipping away at racial obstacles.

Though she rarely complained, her daughter said, it was difficult being the only black woman in the white-male dominated assembly. The younger Ms. Welcome recalled that once, attending a legislative conference in Ocean City, the hotel proprietors put Delegate Welcome in a small windowless room next to the furnace.

That experience led her to introduce a public accommodations law that opened Maryland's hotels and public places to all its citizens.

One of her proudest accomplishments was leading the fight to change Morgan State College to Morgan State University, a stroke that increased the historically black school's prestige and funding.

Former Gov. Harry Hughes said of Mrs. Welcome, "She and I served together in the tough times of the '60s, with the civil rights battles going on. She was tenacious . . . but very gentle."

But she also had time to act as a mentor for the other black politicians who followed in her footsteps, said state Sen. Clarence Blount, who noted that Mrs. Welcome was, by the time he was elected to the Senate in 1970, a "powerful and influential" member of the finance committee.

"She sort of took us along by the hand and acted like a mother to us, defended us and rebuked us when she thought we were off," Senator Blount said yesterday.

Besides her daughter, her survivors include eight sisters, Thelma Freeman Flood, Willette Freeman Davidson and Margaret Freeman, all of New York City; Lovey Freeman Proctor and Theodocia Freeman Freison, both of Detroit; Mary Freeman Campbell and Evelyn Freeman Logan, both of North Carolina and Janice Freeman Patterson of New Jersey; four brothers, Vincent Freeman and Price Freeman, both of Philadelphia; Dr. Stephen Freeman of New Jersey and Nubern Freeman of North Carolina; and a grandson, Gregory Welcome Mercer.

Services for Mrs. Welcome will be held at 11 a.m. Thursday at Grace Presbyterian Church at Greenspring Avenue and Banister Road.

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